

*EUROPEAN MIGRANTS AS “AMBASSADORS OF MODERNIZATION”?  
THE CASE OF THE GERMANS IN YUCATÁN DURING THE HENEQUEN BOOM*

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***Abstract***

From 1880 until 1914, the Mexican state of Yucatán enjoyed an economic boom thanks to the export of henequen. During this period, hundreds of North American and European immigrants came to the peninsula in different capacities, as investors, merchants, managers, professionals and technicians, but also as laborers and service personnel.” From a culturally arrogant position, some of them saw themselves as part of a “civilizing mission”, by means of which they would help “educate” the locals.

From an ethno-historical perspective, the present communication explores the causes that originated the migration of German-speaking peoples into the Mayab, considering the preexisting socio-cultural, political, and legal conditions that gave way to such a favorable receiving context for the foreigners. In contrast to other studies, some of the main consequences for the hosting society and the immigrants themselves are also explored, as well as various sub-cultural perspectives.

This contribution presents one aspect of the preliminary results of a large dissertation project that draws its conclusion on hundreds of primary and secondary sources consulted and/or gained in Austria, Germany, the United States, and México.

## Introduction

One winter afternoon, while waiting for the tramway, a colleague asked me about my current research interests. After I answered that I study the German immigrants in Yucatán, many of which were of modest means, he looked at me confused and said: "I thought that in México being German is equal to being rich."<sup>1</sup>

According to some scholars who have studied this group, these well-off merchants, who saw themselves mostly as temporary residents, were only interested in increasing their capitals as soon as possible in order to go back to Germany. Considering themselves as members of a "superior culture", they looked down on Mexican society and chose to segregate themselves from it. Intra-ethnic marriage, tight associations exclusively with compatriots, usage of German as first language and a disdain for the host society were kept for several generations.<sup>2</sup>

To which degree does this image represent authentically the German experience in Mexico? Were the majority of these immigrants already wealthy by their arrival? How was this notion of the "affluent Germans" created? It is possible to identify three contributors to this process. Some of its roots can be found in México's efforts to attract immigrants of German-speaking origin during the nineteenth-century.<sup>3</sup> A good part of the Mexican elites and the media saw Western European migration as a social panacea that would "help" the newly independent country to become a progressive society.<sup>4</sup> Modernization, understood as economic progress, was in the imagery of the Mexican elites something that came from the outside, concretely from Europe; therefore, it had to be brought by "white" immigrants from overseas. This is how Germans, preferred because they were considered hard workers and Anglophobes, were invested with an

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<sup>1</sup> Fieldnote, 16.09.2010. This communication present some of the preliminary results of a comprehensive dissertation project: Alma Durán-Merk, *'In Our Sphere of Life.' Dimensions of Social Incorporation in a Stratified Society. The Case of the German-Speaking Immigrants in Yucatán and their Descendants, 1876-1914*, Ph.D. thesis, (Augsburg: Universität Augsburg, 2013). For the sake of brevity, only additional sources are listed here in the footnotes.

<sup>2</sup> Jürgen Buchenau, *Tools of Progress. A German Merchant Family in Mexico City, 1865-Present* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2004); Brígida von Mentz, Verena Radkau, Beatriz Scharrer, y Guillermo Turner. *Los pioneros del imperialismo alemán en México*. México: CIESAS, 1982.

<sup>3</sup> Among the scholars that have documented this phenomenon we find Walther L. Bernecker, "Los alemanes en el México decimonónico: cuantificación, estructura socio-profesional, posturas político-ideológicas," in: *Jahrbuch für Geschichte von Staat, Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft Lateinamerikas*, ed. Hermann Kellenbenz (Köln: Böhlau, 1988b); Moisés González Navarro, *Los extranjeros en México y los mexicanos en el extranjero, 1821-1970*, vol. 2 (México: Colegio de México, 1994); Marianne Oeste de Bopp, "Die Deutschen in Mexico," in: *Die Deutschen in Lateinamerika. Schicksal und Leistung*, ed. Hartmut Fröschle (Tübingen: Erdmann, 1979); Brígida von Mentz, *Das Mexicobild der Deutschen im 19. Jahrhundert (1821-1861)* (Pdh. D. Thesis, 1975).

<sup>4</sup> Walther L. Bernecker, "El mito de la riqueza mexicana. Alejandro de Humboldt. Del analista al propagandista," in: *Alejandro de Humboldt. Una nueva visión del mundo*, ed. Frank Holl (México: UNAM, 2003); George Dieter Berninger, *La inmigración en México, 1821-1857* (México: SEP/Setentas, 1974).

image of “ambassadors of modernity”, imagery that found eco in some of them, specially during the time of high German nationalism, that is, after 1871. From a culturally arrogant position, these “higher rank” people were on a mission, bringing their “knowledge, capitals, and talents” to México, instilling “better” working habits, and improving the characters of supposedly “backwards” peoples.

A second source that has fed this stereotype are embellished family accounts, in which now-Mexican descendants from proletarian German immigrants choose to ignore this reality, misleadingly assuring to have noble origins. They stylize their ancestors as wealthy “pioneers” who came to “discover and take advantage” of the country’s richness which was up for grabs, actions that the locals, being “lazy and inferior,” were “unable to do.”

Other ideas proceed from travel reports, diplomatic accounts, as well as scholarly and popular literature that assured—in a nutshell—that German migrants were mostly scholars and affluent capitalists. As an example: according to Arnold Krumm-Heller, immigration advisor to Mexican President Porfirio Díaz, the Germans in Mexico were very well off, and because of their social and economic power, they were, “the most respected foreigners in México.”<sup>5</sup> What this writer choose to ignore it were the hundreds of his compatriots who believed in modest and even subaltern conditions; he did not mention, neither, that several of those who had acquired wealth by the time he was writing had acquired it two strategies such as marrying up rich Mexican women, or forming associations with locals from which they profited.

Discourses like these have contributed to create a Mexican popular imagery, in which German migration was considered almost exclusively an elite one, and the German immigrant experience itself was presented as inherently marked with success and equated with “virility” and economic and political influence. More recent research, however, is identifying other sources, asking other questions, and giving attention to different types of newcomers who were previously overlooked. The results challenge those claims of superiority, presenting a wider range of migrants from various socio-economic statuses.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Arnold Krumm-Heller, *Mexiko, mein Heimatland!* (Halle Dr. Krumm-Hellersche Verlagsanstalt, 1919), here 45f.

<sup>6</sup> Some of them are: Alma Durán-Merk, *Identifying Villa Carlota: German Settlements in Yucatán, México, during the Second Mexican Empire, 1864-1867* (Magister Artium, Universität Augsburg, 2007); Servando Ortoll, *Vogel: las conquistas y desventuras de un cónsul y hacendado alemán en Colima* (Hermosillo: El Colegio de Sonora, 2005); Georgette José Valenzuela, “El barón Othon E. de Brackel-Welda en el occidente de México,” in: *De extranjeros a inmigrantes en México*, ed. Carlos Martínez Assad (México: UNAM, 2008);

Here I will analyze some aspects of the case of the German-speaking immigrants in the Mexican state of Yucatán, inquiring about the degree to which these migrants complied with the expectations of the local elites as “ambassadors of modernity”. Germans-speaking people are here defined as people of German culture born in countries other than México.<sup>7</sup> Most of the information is drawn from the databank “German-Speaking Immigrants in Yucatán, 1876-1914”.<sup>8</sup> This contains primary sources obtained in more than 40 public and private archives on both sides of the Atlantic, as well as from hemerography, field notes, and 32 interviews.

I will address part of the henequen boom, focusing in the period from 1876 until 1914. This “henequen’s extended Olegariato,”<sup>9</sup> includes from the beginning of the Porfiriato until right before the arrival of Salvador Alvarado’s Constitutionalist government, a time when the export-led growth of the economy —the production of henequen, Yucatán’s “Green Gold”— turned that state into one of the richest in the country.<sup>10</sup>

This migratory phenomenon is being approached from an ethno-historical perspective, which seeks to understand the way in which economics, culture, demography and politics of the sending and receiving countries are articulated through migration.<sup>11</sup>

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Ekkehard Lauritzen, *Briefe aus Mexiko. Heinrich Ude: Aus Lübeck nach Mexiko*, <[http://www.lauritzen-haburg.de/ude\\_mexico.html](http://www.lauritzen-haburg.de/ude_mexico.html)>, (accessed 21.03.2010)>; Ana Luisa Francisca Rojas Marín, *Del bosque a los árboles*, (Puebla, BUAP, 2007).

<sup>7</sup> Given the different configurations of Europe from 1821 until after the First World War, some German-speaking people, who identify themselves as of German culture, could had been born, for example, in part of today’s Switzerland, Poland, Hungary, France, etc. Others, although born in countries such as Haiti or Venezuela, were German subjects.

<sup>8</sup> Created specially for Durán-Merk, 2013. It contains data related a total of 607 people —German-speaking immigrants and their descendants— who resided in Yucatán between 1876 and 1914. The information was compiled between 2002 and 2012 in private and public archives in Austria, Germany, The United States, and México; additionally, data was generated by the use of ethnographical techniques, such as interviews, etc. This database is currently being expanded to cover until 1960.

<sup>9</sup> The term “Olegariato” was proposed by Allen Wells and Gilbert M. Joseph, *Summer of Discontent, Season of Upheaval: Elite Politics and Rural Insurgency in Yucatán, 1876-1915* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996). It designates the period from 1901-1909, when Olegario Molina —sometimes through his straw man Enrique Muñoz Arístegui, others from his position as Secretary of Public Works— exercised his power over Yucatan’s politics.

<sup>10</sup> The henequen boom, going from 1876 until 1930, has been widely studied. See for example Gilbert Joseph and Allen Wells, “Corporate Control of a Monocrop Economy: International Harvest and Yucatán’s Henequen Industry”, *Latin American Research Review* 17, no. 1 (1982): 69-99; Friedrich Katz, *Deutschland, Diaz und die mexikanische Revolution: Die deutsche Politik in Mexiko 1870 - 1920* (Berlin: Dt. Verl. d. Wiss., 1964); Allen Wells, *Yucatán’s Gilded Age: Haciendas, Henequen, and the International Harvester, 1860-1915* (Albuquerque: Univ. of New Mexico Pr., 1985).

<sup>11</sup> Caroline Brettell, *Anthropology and Migration. Essays on Transnationalism, Ethnicity, and Identity* (Walnut Creek: Altamira, 2003).

This analysis has three parts: First, I will introduce the characteristics of this specific migration and some the causes that motivated it. After that, the migratory context will be painted with broad strokes; to illustrate this, I will concentrate on affluent businesspersons and, as contrast, on store clerks. In the third and last segment, some of the most significant consequences of this movement for both —the newcomers and the host society— will be sketched.

## 1 Types of German Migration Received by Yucatán

Typologies of migration classify, first, migration as a group, or as individual phenomena.<sup>12</sup> The notion that México received only elite German migration had been partly based in the postulate that no group migration —that is, agricultural projects— were known. However, that conception has been discarded since 2007, with the identification of the Villa Carlota Colonies.<sup>13</sup> Additionally, several studies and sources are disclosing in more detail the experiences of a considerable number of German commoners who lived in diverse Mexican locations.<sup>14</sup>

### *Antecedents: Migration Before 1876*

In Yucatán, four-hundred-and-forty-three German-speaking people of both sexes and all ages lived from 1865 until 1867 in two settlements, sponsored by the administration of Maximilian von Habsburg. Located in the mostly-Maya villages of Santa Elena and Pustunich, these farming colonies attracted mainly dispossessed farmers, poor craftsmen, and large families. These “hard working and efficient” settlers were brought by the Second Mexican Empire, in the words of its officials, to “cultivate the land, to rescue Yucatán from the decadence and stagnation” in which it found itself.”<sup>15</sup> Not without ups and downs, the modest immigrants integrated rather quickly with the rural population, and processes of acculturation and transculturation started to take place —such as marriages, religious conversions, and the sharing of practical knowledge. But these ambassadors of agricultural modernity were in less than two

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<sup>12</sup> Klaus J. Bade, *Enzyklopädie Migration in Europa vom 17. Jahrhundert bis zur Gegenwart* (München: Schöningh, 2007).

<sup>13</sup> All information about Villa Carlota comes from Durán-Merk, 2007 and its Spanish translation, published under the title *Villa Carlota. Colonias alemanas en Yucatán* (Mérida: CONACULTA, ICY, CEPESA, 2009). There is additional data about other smaller German colonies in the state of Veracruz, sponsored by the Porfirian government, which remain unstudied.

<sup>14</sup> See footnote 6.

<sup>15</sup> “Importante”, *Periódico Oficial del Departamento de Yucatán* 25.10.1865: 3.

years demoted from their rank. The colonies could not survive for several reasons, one of them being that the land given to them—which was selected by two German engineers—was inappropriate for large cultivation; another, the end of the Second Mexican Empire itself. The newcomers were not able to make the Yucatecan dry-soils productive; European seeds and tools failed to reach their goals. Instead of “imposing” their “superior culture” on their hosts, the immigrants adopted rather quickly some of the ways of their receivers.

After the break down of this colonization program, several families stayed in Yucatán; most of them moved to Mérida, its capital. Many of these former colonists found themselves competing with the local labor force as draymen, shoemakers, construction workers, house painters, carpenters, or as day laborers (*jornaleros*) in haciendas. There were, however, a few cases of girls being adopted by wealthy *meridano* families, and one German woman who married into the rural elite. In all cases, however, local practices were embraced.

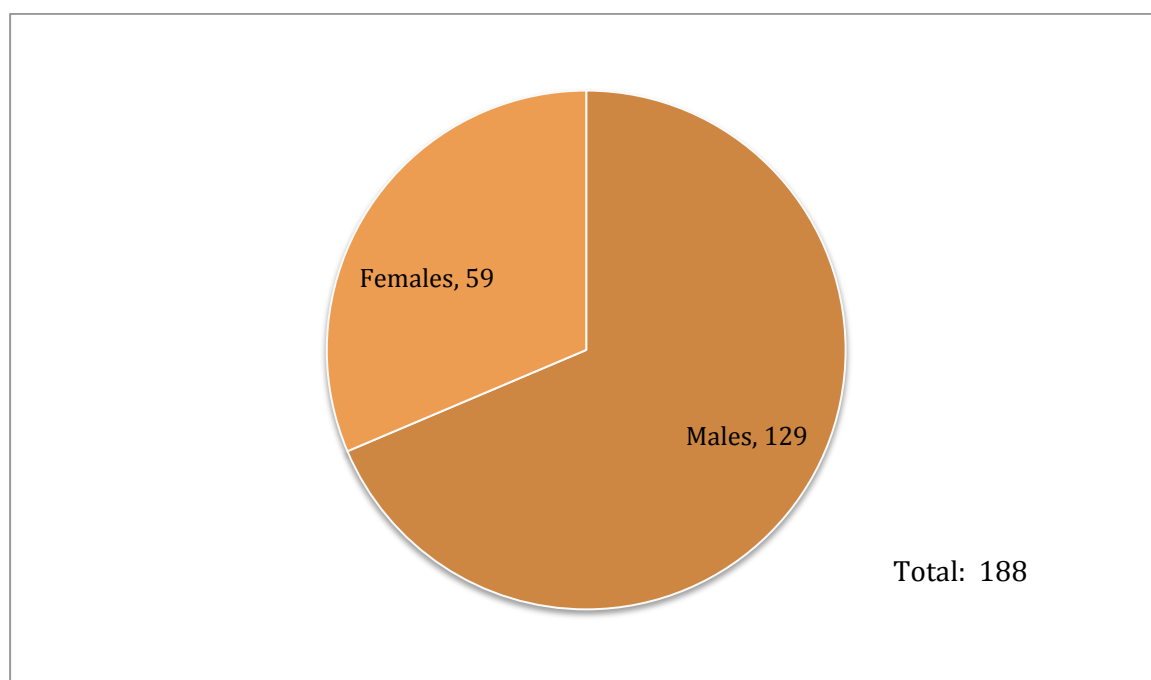
Those who migrated to form the Villa Carlota colonies, then, did not succeed to fulfill the expectations set on them: they were not able to form economically successful settlements, and after 1876 became part of the subaltern local classes. As the generations progressed, a quick loss of the markers of German cultural identity could be confirmed, meaning that most of them already by the second generation had at least one parent born in Mexico, and integrated culturally, socially, structurally into the local local working classes. In terms of identification, they quickly saw themselves as “Yucatalemanes”, and not as foreigners. By the third generation, their memories of the German origins of the ancestors were not more than disconnected fragments of information without concrete significance.

### *German-Speaking Immigrants in Yucatán During the Henequen Boom*

In regards to individual migration into Yucatán, between 1821 and 1876 not even ten German-speaking people became residents of that state. Their number increased after the beginning of the Porfiriato in 1876, thanks to the conjunction of several internal and external factors: the augmented demand of raw henequen by the United States’ agricultural industry, an improvement in techniques and cultivation of the

henequen plant, and Mexican liberal economic policies that were embraced by the local planters, among others.<sup>16</sup>

As Graphic 1 shows, a total of 129 males and 59 women, adding up to 188 German-speaking people, were residents of Yucatán between 1876 and 1914.<sup>17</sup> This, by the way, shows only the immigrant generation.



**Figure 1. German-Speaking Residents in Yucatán (1876-1914).**

This quantity is higher than that of any other documented city besides México's capital at that time.<sup>18</sup> Although the dominance of male immigrants can be associated either with work<sup>19</sup> or with elite migration, many scholars have overlooked the first option and chosen to interpret that this "must be an elite migration". I contend, however, that other two characteristics ought to be taken under consideration before that can be determined: origin of the immigrants and occupation in the society of origin. I will

<sup>16</sup> Allen Wells, "Henequen," in: *The Second Conquest of Latin America. Coffee, Henequen and Oil During the Export Boom, 1850-1930*, ed. Steven C. Topik and Allen Wells (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998).

<sup>17</sup> Defined according to the guidelines of the United Nations, immigrants are those who reside in a different country to that of origin for at least one year. United Nations, "International Migration Report," ed. United Nations (New York: 2000), <<http://www.un.org/esa/population/publications/ittmig2002/2002ITTMIGTEXT22-11.pdf>>, (accessed 27.03.2010).

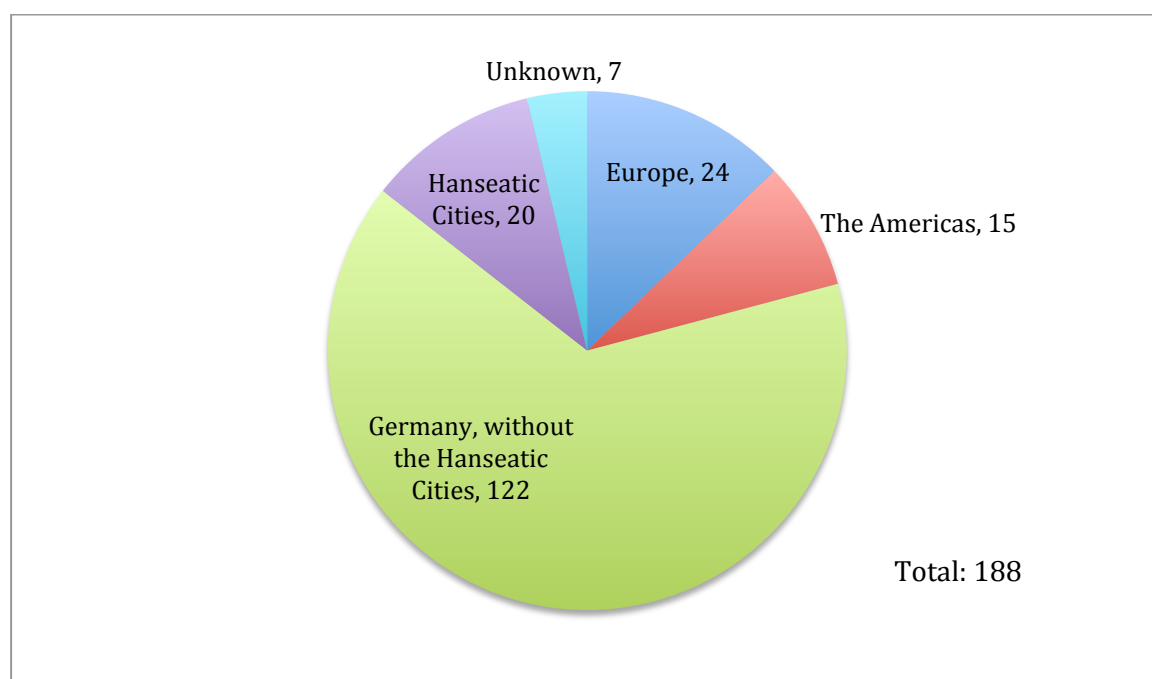
<sup>18</sup> As reference, a study done in Puebla reports a total of 111 German visitors (not necessarily immigrants), from 1821 until 1910. From them, 88 were males, and 23 females, cf. Rojas Marín, 2007, 61.

<sup>19</sup> Work migration has various forms: voluntarily, economic, indentured service, slavery and some cases of escape/expulsion, cf. Bade, 2007.

analyze those aspects ahead. Nevertheless, the Yucatecan numbers already tip towards a community that included some families.

### *Origin of the Immigrants*

Another characteristic associated with wealthy migration was having Hanseatic Cities' origins—that is Bremen, Hamburg or Lübeck. The commercial interest of those centers largely depended on the exportation of their products, mostly iron goods, machinery, chemicals, arms, and luxury manufactured articles.<sup>20</sup> In the case of Yucatán, as this Figure 2 shows, only 20 out of 187 migrants came from those cities. Important is also there was a minimum of 39 people, although declaring themselves as German subjects, where in born in places this similar as Constantinople, Kingstown, Warsaw, or Port Prince.



**Figure 2. Origin of the Immigrants**

From this information it is possible to, first, identify that Hanseatic business people were only a minority, and also to understand that the group was so diverse, to the degree that is possible to speak about several sub-cultures, different preferences and command of

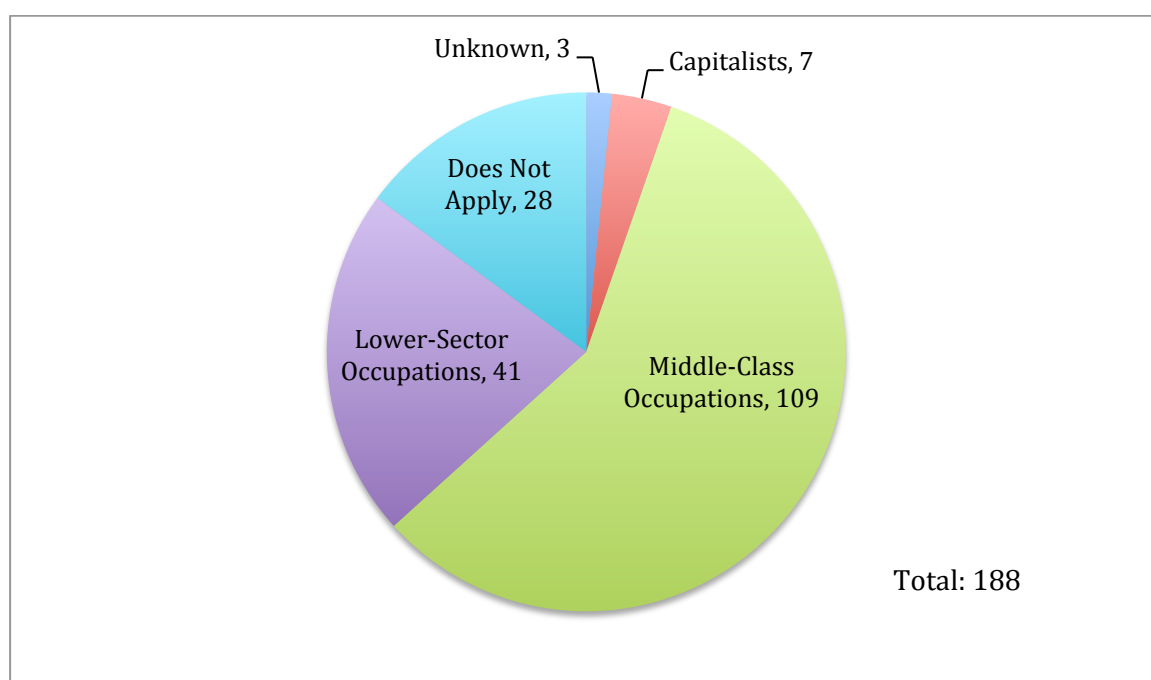
<sup>20</sup> Walther L. Bernecker, "Las relaciones comerciales germano-alemanas en el siglo XIX," in: *Las relaciones germano-alemanas. Desde el aporte de los hermanos Humboldt hasta el presente*, ed. León Bieber (México: Colegio de México, 2001); Brígida von Mentz et al., eds., *Los empresarios alemanes, el Tercer Reich, la oposición de derecha y Cárdenas*, vol. 1 (México: CIESAS, 1988).



the German language (some of them, actually, spoke English or French as first language), identifications with more than one nation-state (many had double or even triple citizenships), and largely varied traditions and rituals, for example. All this brings into light the impossibility of see this as a homogenous group.

### *Home-Background Occupation*

The third factor upon which we ought to reflect is the occupation of the immigrants at the point of arrival to the Mayab. As depicted in Graphic 3, it was possible to determine the home-back background of 185 out of 188 immigrants. Only seven capitalists were detected; the large majority of the immigrants came from the middle classes, and less than one third belonged to disadvantaged groups. Those who were younger than 15 years at the point of migration are listed under the heading “Does Not Apply,” as well those women who did not declare on occupation. This data supports the assertion that working-class German commoners migrated into Yucatán.



**Figure 3. Occupations at the Point of Migration**

The few affluent merchants that arrived to Yucatán opened large commercial houses dedicated to export-import as early as 1869, when the *almacén y ferretería* J. Crasemann y Compañía, later on re-named as El Candado, was founded by Juan

Crasemann. The other large German-owned large business, Ritter y Bock, was founded in 1890 by Carlos and Wilhelm Ritter, Felipe Bock, and Enrique Schacht. These wealthy investors could be considered, using the term coined by the historian Walther Bernecker, as *Handelskonquistadoren*, trade conquerors.<sup>21</sup> With capitals that will look modest now—but good family connections guaranteeing generous lines of credit—these merchants of modernity benefited from the wealthy Yucatecans, who, in turn, made their fortunes at the expense of people of Maya heritage and other poor Yaqui, Koreans, Cuban, Spanish and Chinese laborers, upon which a good part of the landed elite imposed slavery-like work conditions,<sup>22</sup> as the journalist John Kenneth Turner denounced in “México Bárbaro.”<sup>23</sup>

Not only did these legates of modernity and consumerism sold machinery, tools, and construction materials—with profits on foreign products that could reach up to a 78%<sup>24</sup>—but also loaned money to capital-starved planters who either paid good interest on it, or, in default cases, ended up losing their properties. In the Yucatecan roller-coastal-like economy, foreign capital gave these traders security, which also allowed them to buy properties, even haciendas, when these were at their lowest price.<sup>25</sup>

But there were other sub-groups of German-speaking migrants, which until now have not been studied in detail. The first of them are craftsmen and unskilled laborers. The second are newcomers in occupations in the middle-economical sectors, formed by professionals, employees, and medium- to small-sized entrepreneurs. Due to time constraints, I will only address the employees here.

Corresponding to 37% of the immigrants, the high presence of *Kaufmänner*, clerks, in this group is remarkable. Their high percentage contradicts the stereotype of

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<sup>21</sup> Walther L. Bernecker, *Die Handelskonquistadoren. Europäische Interessen und mexikanischer Staat im 19. Jahrhundert* (Stuttgart: Steiner, 1988a). Although the term was coined to describe an ideal social type that included British, North American and German powerful businessmen, and their practices, in México City from 1821 until ca. 1860, some writers have uncritically extended its use to other groups or times.

<sup>22</sup> Javier Amado Corona Baeza, “La inmigración coreana,” in: *Henequén, leyenda, historia y cultura*, ed. Maureen Ransom Carty (México: Instituto de Cultura de Yucatán, 2006); Manuel Ferrer Muñoz, “Notas sueltas sobre presencia de canarios en Yucatán (siglos XVIII y XIX),” *Anuario de Estudios Atlánticos* 48, no. (2002): 121-132; José Luis Gutiérrez May, *Sanos, fuertes y humildes. Los inmigrantes coreanos en Yucatán, 1905-1910* (Licenciado en Historia, Universidad Autónoma de Yucatán, 2011); Raquel Padilla Ramos, “Los yaquis: migración y deportación,” in: *Henequén, leyenda, historia y cultura*, ed. Maureen Ransom Carty (México: Instituto de Cultura de Yucatán, 2006); Wells, 1985.

<sup>23</sup> John Kenneth Turner, *México bárbaro* (Mexico: Contenido, 1975).

<sup>24</sup> AGEY, Justicia, Civil, Deudas, 1918, Caja 218, exp. 14.

<sup>25</sup> In the AGEY collections Notarias, Justicia Civil, Justicia Penal, Judicial, and Gobernación, hundreds of entries were checked. Their relevant contents have been incorporated into Durán-Merk.

most Germans being wealthy owners. Payroll lists reveal that for every partner in a company, there were three German employees, most of who did not make it all the way to trade conquistadors themselves. Were all employees of the two large hardware dealers in Mérida, El Candado y Ritter y Bock, foreigners? No. For every German worker, three to four locals were hired, although not with the same salaries: Mexicans were paid 1/2 to 1/4 of what the aliens got.

Summarizing, we can say that the evidence clearly shows that this was a working-class migration and, to a high degree, a network-mediated one.

## 2 Immigration Context: Working-Class German Immigrants

What attracted these migrants to Yucatán during that time? On the one hand, this period includes The Great Depression—which affected negatively the North American and the German economies from 1873 until 1879—and the subsequent tightening of migration controls on part of the United States;<sup>26</sup> contrasting, México's immigration law reflected the political-economical interest of its time: it was open to all foreigners.<sup>27</sup> It corresponds also with the third migratory wave out of Germany, 1880-1893,<sup>28</sup> a response to high population growth and diminished employment opportunities.<sup>29</sup>

On the other hand, this was the time of Germany's expansion,<sup>30</sup> that in the concrete case of México included the export of industrial products and financing—which implied the mobilization of investors, executives and specialists, but also of modestly paid business representatives, and employees.

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<sup>26</sup> After having received more than five million immigrants between 1880 and 1890, that country started to control, screen out, and return or deport, those it considered undesirable. Among those measurements we can count the 1885 Contract Labor Law, the legislation about expulsion of aliens from 1888, the creation of the Bureau of Immigration in 1891, and the setting up of Ellis Island, screening station that started operations in 1882. For a historical view of immigration restriction in the United States, see Roger Daniels, *Guarding the Golden Door: American Immigration Policy and Immigrants since 1882* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2004), 3-26.

<sup>27</sup> Instituto Nacional de Migración and Secretaría de Gobernación, *Compilación histórica de la Legislación Migratoria en México 1821-2000* (México: INM, SG, 2000), 69-70, Ley de matriculación de extranjeros del 16.03.1861. Luz María Martínez Montiel and Araceli Reynoso Medina, "Inmigración europea y asiática siglos XIX y XX," in: *Simbiosis de culturas. Los inmigrantes y su cultura en México*, ed. Guillermo Bonfil Batalla (México: CONACULTA, FCE, 1993), mention in p. 29 other legislations, unfortunately without clarifications neither footnotes.

<sup>28</sup> Klaus J. Bade, "Die deutsche überseeische Massenauswanderung im 19. und frühen 20. Jahrhundert: Bestimmungsfaktoren und Entwicklungsbedingungen," in: *Auswanderer - Wanderarbeiter - Gastarbeiter. Bevölkerung, Arbeitsmarkt und Wanderung in Deutschland seit Mitte des 19. Jahrhunderts*, ed. Klaus J. Bade (Ostfildern: Scripta Mercaturae Verlag, 1984), cf. 262, 276-78.

<sup>29</sup> During this period, individual out-migration in general went from 40 up to 42.2%, and included not only laborers but also employees. Family migration increased too: a household followed the head of family, who was searching for a job, cf. Bade 1984, 277.

<sup>30</sup> Von Mentz et al. 1988, 19-36.

I will take now the case of sales clerks, especially in hardware stores, to journey into the career determinants of what appears to have been in those days an occupational niche.

First, the hardware store business grew significantly during the Olegariato thanks to a conjuncture that is possible to describe in four aspects:

- The rise of henequen production, which required that the hacendados purchased machinery, equipment, tools, etc.<sup>31</sup>
- A tax on henequen that was introduced in 1883, which by 1900 equaled 70% of Yucatán's budget.<sup>32</sup> This allowed, for the first time, the undertaking of major public works —such as the electrification and city pavement of Mérida and the construction of large and modern hospitals, for example.
- Increased consumer power of the regional elites. The local upper classes who benefited from the cultivation and marketing of the henequen developed a taste for the consumption of luxury-imported goods —such as made-to-order decorated elevators— that they were happy to pay at exorbitant places.

The second reason has to do with the requirements of the job as clerk itself. To become a *Kaufmann* necessitated a relatively short, inexpensive training, which could be done in Germany. If on one hand international experience was expected from these employees, some also were “forced” to consider that option, given that by the 1890's there were way less open positions in Germany as candidates applying for them.<sup>33</sup> Many had to migrate, looking for a job and a better life, in the same way that nowadays, Mexicans and Central Americans take a chance and move to the United States searching for new opportunities for them and their families. This fact makes us aware that some of the countries, like Germany, that are now complaining about immigrants coming to them, were at some point in history actually large exporters of what they considered as “extra” population.

As third factor, we can say that some skills —cultural capital— could be transferred across borders, cultures, and languages, and given that the spectrum of tasks

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<sup>31</sup> For example, the income from henequen exports went from 1,078,000 pesos in 1877 up to 6,229,000 in only ten years, reaching its peak in 1902, when it brought in a total of 33,977,00 pesos, cf. Fred Carstensen and Diane Roazen, "Foreign Markets, Domestic Initiative, and the Emergence of a Monocrop Economy: The Yucatecan Experience, 1825-1903", *HAHR* 72, no. 4 (1992): 555-92, here 559.

<sup>32</sup> Raúl Vela Sosa, *Yucatán Exportador. Memoria del Siglo XX* (Mérida: UADY, Senado de la República LXI Legislatura 2011), 91.

<sup>33</sup> "Kleine Mitteilungen," *Deutsches Handelsblatt*, 15.02.1898.

found in a hardware store were various, not all of them required that the worker would be proficient in Spanish at his arrival.<sup>34</sup>

The last and fourth one has to do with ethnic ties. Besides the value projection of having German employees, trust was highly regarded by the trade conquistadors. For example, the articles for sale in the hardware stores did not have a fixed price. This was bargained according to several factors. However, there was a minimum amount the merchandise could be sold, but this was coded and only the German employees could read that cipher.

Were these simple employees seen as “ambassadors of modernity”? Although retail work was held in high esteem during the colonial times in Yucatán,<sup>35</sup> this began to change towards the eighteen-century, when Afro-Yucatecans were send by their bosses to represent them in some businesses.<sup>36</sup> Later, people of all admixtures held these occupations. Towards the turn into the twentieth century, and from the perspective of the underprivileged classes, the German employees could have been perceived as “well-situated.” Yet, from the point of view of the Yucatecan upper-middle classes and of the elites that was not the case. For example, well-to-do *meridano* families would rearranged their estates when German employees wished to marry some of their daughters, as to assure that the foreigners will not have access to the family’s assets. Social and family ties were more often created with Yucatecans of middle, and lower socio-economic ranks than with those of the *Casta Divina*, a circle of about 10 to 15 traditionally very wealthy Yucatecan families.

With a low profile, most of the employees did not belong to the expensive, private, clubs of Merida. Most of them had moderate salaries and lived the quiet life of the middle classes, without enjoying great power or social or political influence. While their bosses enjoyed a luxurious living in Colonial houses, villas and haciendas, the clerks inhabited simple rented rooms in the homes of mid-class Yucatecan families, or shared a chamber at the same place where they work. Many of them moved to other Mexican or Central American cities after their contract expired, only a few coming back to Germany immediately after.

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<sup>34</sup> Cashiers, stocking, managing the “bodega”, shipping and receiving merchandise, salespeople, ordering, banking, accounting, cook, etc.

<sup>35</sup> Only Spanish and foreigners, rarely Maya, did this work.

<sup>36</sup> Matthew Restall, *The Black Middle: Africans, Mayas, and Spaniards in Colonial Yucatan* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009). Some Afro-Yucatecans were also foremen in haciendas.

### 3 Most Important Consequences

The main objective of labor migration is to better one's economic position.<sup>37</sup> Were these immigrants "successful"? Depends on how "success" is defined, at which point in time, and from whose perspective.

Contingent upon several factors —among them socio-economic position, religious affiliation, gender, age, and family situation —the migration experiences of the German-speaking people in Yucatán were very different. The same applies to the way the foreigners were perceived by the local population.

#### *Consequences for the Immigrants*

Most of the workers had a thin pay-check, compared to the income available to the trade conquistadors. Needless to say that those in low skilled positions, and in rural areas, did not have access to the symbols of power and money necessary to alternate with the upper classes. A process of internal stratification within the German community in Mérida itself was formed, in which "Germanness" was disputed.

Local racial prejudice facilitated hypergamie in a few cases, and with it an integration into the Yucatecan middle and middle-upper social strata. Nevertheless, not even a handful of descendants of these immigrants made it into the *Casta Divina*. The rest of the migrants who decided to stay and their offsprings integrated into the middle and the disadvantaged groups. Status dissonance was the result in some cases. The life-worlds of various German newcomers —although being "white" and coming from a "high culture"— resembled those of the poor locals, which in those days were looked down upon. How to conciliate being of German progeny, but poor or middle-class? This is still a riddle for some of the descendants of those immigrants.

#### *Consequences for the Receiving Society*

Did the Yucatecans resent that some Germans were making money? In some cases yes, in other no, depending on the activities of those immigrants.

Many of the products sold in Mérida were manufactured in Germany, therefore the wealth tended to stay within the already powerful capitalists, which their

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<sup>37</sup> Klaus J. Bade, *Europa in Bewegung. Migration vom späten 18. Jahrhundert bis zur Gegenwart* (München: Beck, 2000).

competitors did not see with good eyes. Additionally, local dependency and consumerism of luxury goods were reinforced, which was criticized by some.

On the other hand, some of the immigrants who stayed helped to solidify the then meager Yucatecan middle-class, which was estimated to reach barely a 3 to a 5% of the population around 1876. Other immigrants and their descendants situated in the lower strata joined the incipient unions and various organizations that supported revolutionary changes in the Mayab. Additionally transcultural processes took place, which included material<sup>38</sup> as well as non-material<sup>39</sup> culture. By 1915, however, the relationships among the diverse cultural groups in Yucatán were such that the imagery of the Germans as “ambassadors of civilizations” was widely questioned.

Other Mexican entities received more trade conquistadors than Yucatán, who, according to the literature, considered themselves as *Auslandsdeutsche*, German residents abroad.<sup>40</sup> In contrast, the Yucatán peninsula attracted just a few privileged migrants, but many more from those who were willing to integrate into the receiving society and, with the passage of only one generation, identified themselves as “Yuca-Alemanes.” They, perhaps, became unofficial ambassadors of good will.

I certainly hope that this communication facilitates a more nuanced discussion about ethnic relations in the context of migration, and that it contributes to the exploration of the relationship of status, class, and race in Latin America.

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<sup>38</sup> I.e. food consumption and preparation, clothing, objects, furniture.

<sup>39</sup> Senses, weather and climate, accents, media, politics, religion,

<sup>40</sup> Von Mentz et al., 1982; Silke Nagel, *Ausländer in Mexiko. Die Kolonien der deutschen und US-amerikanischen Einwanderer in der mexikanischen Hauptstadt, 1890-1942* (Frankfurt am Main: Vervuert, 2005).

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